

### FUELLING WARS WITH CONFLICT TIMBER

*By Mike Lundberg and Alice Blondel*

Disputes over the control of natural resources, such as oil, diamonds and timber are at the heart of many conflicts, with income derived from natural resources providing the funding for many more. Revenue from timber sales in particular has perpetuated some of the world's most brutal conflicts, providing the financial and logistical support with which governments and rebel groups have fuelled their war machines. The individuals involved in resource trading and the routes they use are often the same as those trafficking weapons and mercenaries. Moreover, the very nature of conflict precludes proper planning for the exploitation of natural resources and this almost invariably results in unsustainable practices and destruction of a resource that could have formed the basis of future sustainable development. Unless the nexus between natural resources and conflict is addressed, conflicts fuelled by resources such as timber will continue and active peace will remain elusive.

#### **What is Conflict Timber?**

Global Witness defines 'conflict timber' as that which 'has been traded in a way that drives violent armed conflict and threatens national or regional security'. The phrase was coined by Global Witness in 1999, and popularised through a UN report in 2001 on the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where timber was one of many natural resources that have been fuelling

the world's deadliest conflict since WWII, with at least 3.5 million war-related deaths.

Conflict timber is distinct from illegally-sourced timber, which has been logged in contravention of national or international laws. However, in both instances important revenue is removed from the government's budgetary oversight, and often goes unnoticed by the international community. It is this lack of transparency and active oversight by domestic and international actors that allows the relationship of timber, weapons, mercenaries and cross-border trafficking of all three to continue.

#### **A Global Problem**

While it does not yet generate public concern like the trade in 'blood diamonds', the trade in conflict timber has fuelled violence in countries across the globe, including Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d'Ivoire, Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Burma, and Cambodia, and has facilitated endemic corruption and human rights abuses in many more.

In Liberia, the logging industry provided extra-budgetary income and logistics that facilitated weapons imports and support for foreign rebel groups, including the notorious RUF in Sierra Leone and the MPIGO and MJP in western Cote d'Ivoire. While the Liberian logging industry generated hundreds of millions of dollars annually, very little to none of that ended up being passed on as benefits to average Liberians as tens of millions of dollars worth of timber revenue went unaccounted for within the government. In the DRC, Zimbabwe's military involvement in the war there was compensated by a secret deal to award to a Zanu-PF company the world's largest timber concession, while timber revenue was used

to fuel fighters in the northeast of the country and exports were of such a significant amount that the market cost of timber in neighbouring Uganda dropped by half.

In Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge derived US\$10-20 million per month from illegal exports to Thailand, facilitated by the highest levels of the Thai government, the Thai military and Cambodia's two prime ministers at the time. While in Burma, which has been steeped in conflict for decades, timber revenue totalling over US\$280 million per year (in 2001) helps sustain the brutal military government, while rebel groups have also financed their war efforts through timber sales.

### **Dealing with conflict timber**

There are various ways the international community can work to help ensure that conflict timber no longer provides funding and logistics to warring parties. One option is the imposition of UN Security Council (UNSC) sanctions: in May 2003, the UNSC imposed sanctions on the Liberian logging industry, for the first time explicitly recognising timber as a conflict resource that can threaten international peace and security. The sanctions have helped bring about the end to active conflict and have placed a number of logging industry actors on travel ban and asset-freeze lists. However, the sanctions are not a panacea, as armed groups continue to profit from domestic timber sales and there are numerous reforms to enact before the sanctions can be lifted, and the timber declared conflict-free.

In Cambodia, while the UN did not directly order timber sanctions, it endorsed and instructed peacekeepers and neighbouring states to uphold a government decision to

ban timber exports (S/1992/792). However, the ban went largely un-enforced, and thus to stop the trade Global Witness began documenting illegal timber exports to Thailand. Within days of Global Witness presenting its evidence in mid 1995, the Thai government closed its border with Cambodia, significantly reducing the Khmer Rouge's ability to fuel its conflict. Attention then turned to monitoring the borders, which the US government played an important role in, and lobbying other countries to encourage changes in Cambodia's forest-use policies. This has ultimately led to a number of reforms and the hiring of an independent monitor, but as in Liberia there are still ongoing problems of illegal logging and corruption related to the timber industry that remain to be addressed.

There is also a critical role to be played by importing companies, their financiers and customers. Just as consumers actively question the origins of some products—for genetic modification, child labour and fair trade—the same consideration should be given to whether timber products have fuelled human rights abuses and civil war. Due diligence by purchasers, their brokers and timber trade associations, in consultation with knowledgeable local actors, should highlight any links to conflict and determine whether or not trading in those products violates OECD guidelines or other national and international business practices. Similarly, local and international civil society should also do more research into the effects of the timber trade in conflict-prone areas, and use that evidence to lobby processors, retailers and consumers to secure more sustainable sources of wood. The various certification schemes available could, through an added awareness of the

geopolitical and social impact of the industry in a particular country or region, incorporate concerns over conflict timber. In the absence of a UNSC resolution, timber-importing countries could also impose smart sanctions on a unilateral or multilateral basis, as Article XXI(c) of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) provides for exemptions relating to security concerns.

### **Increasing UN capacity regarding conflict timber**

As the UN is often called upon to sort out a conflict, it is critical that it expand its capacity to effectively deal with conflict resources. In addition to timber sanctions, Liberia marked first time that a UN peacekeeping mission was specifically mandated to help a government assume full control over its natural resources. Such consideration of natural resources should be mainstreamed into all UN activities. The UN should also adopt a policy to secure only legal and sustainable sources of timber for reconstruction, lest those purchases fuel more corruption or conflict.

The UN should build upon its broad institutional knowledge of conflict resources and the way in which the trade in natural resources, arms and mercenaries are interlinked. Creating a permanent or semi-permanent body to manage such information and conduct its own research would be an efficient move, ensuring the retention of Expert Panel evidence, updating of information on resource and weapons trafficking networks, and deepening the UNSC's understanding of the economic and logistical levers it can use to address instability and conflict. This would afford the UN greater capacity to engage in preventative planning by the Secretariat and

UN missions, and develop more effective responses by the UNSC should crises arise.

### **Conclusion**

The problem of conflict timber is global in scope, and an appreciation of its scale and ability to perpetuate conflict essential. While there are many ways to tackle the problem of conflict timber, progress will be based not upon the immediate policy successes or government decree but on the efficacy of ongoing reforms, with sustainable and transparent management of timber resources. Such success will ultimately depend on the actions and understanding of the UN, donor community, national governments and civil society that—fundamental to ensuring active peace and long-term security—they must sever the links between natural resources and conflict.

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